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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a philosophical framework for using the ballots which a contestant receives as part of one's participation in a forensic tournament. The central thesis of this theoretical article suggests that coaches need to prepare their students for the criticism they will encounter on judge ballots. The argument is made for establishing (1) a perspective for responding to criticism; (2) a procedure for reading the critical comments; and (3) a means of interpreting and classifying the comments of judges. The importance of the judge's functioning in the role of a critic-educator is emphasized in the paper as an intervening variable in deciding what use to make of tournament ballots. The paper concludes that if coaches choose to develop a plan for dealing with ballots, consideration ought to be given to developing a healthy attitude toward comments as a source of growth, as a tool of acknowledging one's successes, and as a means of gaining knowledge about one's self-concept. (MS)

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What Are The Options: The Philosophy of Using Ballots

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Abstract

This paper explores a philosophical framework for using the ballots which a contestant receives as part of one's participation in a forensic tournament. The central thesis of this theoretical article suggests that coaches need to prepare their students for the criticism they will encounter on judge ballots. The argument is made for establishing a perspective for responding to criticism; establishing a procedure for reading the critical comments; and finally, establishing a means of interpreting and classifying the comments of judges. The principal data base is published research material and some unpublished personal research. The importance of the judge functioning in the role of a critic-educator is emphasized as an intervening variable in deciding what use to make of tournament ballots.

One of the more troubling aspects of competitive forensics is the issue of what to do about the comments on the contestant's ballot. As a competitor and as a coach, one feels obligated to do something with those comments. To deal most effectively with ballot comments, it behooves both contestant and coach to have developed some philosophical way of responding. This paper is aimed at clarifying some of the aspects involved in developing a strategy or a means of dealing with comments on the student's ballots. In pursuing that objective, this paper will discuss three issues: establishing a frame of reference; developing an approach to interacting with the ballots; and finally, exploring the task of passing judgment on the comments which appear on the ballots.

Bock and Bock write: "No act of communication is complete until it has been evaluated and criticized by others. No public figures escape the judgments of others" (1981, p. 1). Whether one functions in a tournament setting or in a public communication setting, the one thing speakers need to be willing to accept is the fact that there will be criticism. Knowing that criticism is an inherent part of the tournament setting does not, however, help one feel any more comfortable with the critical process or its product. Some of the discomfort speakers and readers have with critical evaluation might be reduced if they were properly prepared to deal with ballot commentaries.

Part of the process of establishing a frame of reference involves the formation of an attitude toward the growth potential afforded by ballots from critics. If the coach and contestant view ballot com-

ments as a source of potential growth, the comments on ballots can be received in a positive fashion. Obviously, mot all comments will serve that end, but if one looks at ballot comments from that frame of reference, the coach and contestant may discover ways to grow. Embracing this frame of reference implies that the role of the ballot writer is being looked upon as that of a critic--educator. As participants at the Second National Conference on Forensics (1984) indicated: When a person agrees to judge at a forensiic tournament, he/she also agrees to function as a critic-educator.

Growth potential for the contestant may be suggested in a number of ways. Critics may offer comments on the development of an issue or a character; the effective use of both vocal and nonverbal elements of delivery; the presence of distracting vocal or nonverbal mannerisms; the confidence and poise demonstrated by the speaker/reader; the sufficiency of the appeal of the material to the listeners; the propriety of the material; or the timeliness of the materials, to name a few. As Andrews notes: "It is in the pedagogical role that the critic has the opportunity to discuss most fully not only what was happening but what should be happening. The issue is not so much one of raising standards as of helping students learn what standards are, and applying those standards in creating and delivering a message or responding to a message. The critic in this situation clearly and explicitly matches standards to performance when making a judgment" (1983, p. 13). With the ballot writer functioning as a critic-educator, the opportunity for potential growth

for the contestant may be stronger if the ballot comments are seriously dealt with by the student and the coach.

A second aspect of establishing a frame of reference involves the formation of an attitude regarding the evaluative judgment which is mandated to appear on most tournament ballots. One needs to develop a sense of which ranks and ratings are indicative of a "winning" experience. The contestant and coach should reach some agreement, before the tournament, on which evaluative score is an indication of a winning round. By its very nature, a tournament inherently designates some contestants as winners and the rest of the contestatants as something other than winners. To be eliminated from quarterfinals at a national tournament or not make the finals at a local tournament is often regarded as a losing experience by both contestants and coaches. Is the attitude to be one where anything less than a first place rank or a rating score in the top category a sign of "losing"? The contestant and coach need some resolution of what level of performance is regarded as successful before they attempt to deal with the ballot's judgment of relative competitiveness.

Both critic and coach also ought to recognize the reality of receiver-apprehension on the part of the student. Cooper describes receiver-apprehension as "the degree to which students are fearful about misinterpreting, inadequately processing and/or being unable to psychologically adjust to messages" (1981, p. 206). Students, without having had some prior dialogue on what constitutes a "winning" experience may have an extremely difficult time adjusting to an evalua-

tive judgment which is not a first place rank or rating. Unlike the world of baseball, a batting record of .500 in forensics does not seem to carry much weight by way of positive feelings. Perhaps in shaping one's attitude toward what is acceptable as an evaluative judgment score, the coach and student ought to develop a set of performance objectives. The evaluative judgment recorded on the critic's ballot could then be re-ranked to generate a more realistic assessment of a winning or learning performance by the contestant.

One final aspect of developing a frame of reference is that of establishing an attitude toward the relationship between one's self-concept and the comments on the judge's ballot. In discussing self-concept, Fisher and Smith suggest:

> "A self-concept is subjective" means that we do not see ourselves without bias. It is difficult to step outside of ourselves and form a factual opinion of the person we are viewing. When we are engaged in an argument [competitive tournament], we find it difficult, if not impossible to see where we may be wrong. We are too involved with self to be able to clearly monitor our behavior...Not only do we deceive ourselves about our self-concepts, but others can distort our self-concept by incorrect feedback....Distorted feedback can be either favorable or negative. It can be prompted by good or by bad intentions, but nonetheless it helps us form an unrealistic self-concept (1987, p. 28).

The critic-judge may unintentionally damage many contestants by

making comments which adversely impact on the student's self-concept. Coaches whose beginners' group has dwindled in size after the students have participated in three or four tournaments, may or may not fully comprehend the impact that ballot commentaries may have had on self-concept and on the students' departure. Hanson's (1987) survey of students' perceptions of good and bad judges, indicates that students associated bad judges with ballots which contained mostly negative comments and/or comments which were of a cutting personal nature. Further, Hanson's study also reveals that the vast majority of students involved in the study exhibited little intention to comply with the advice given by judges regarded as bad judges. If an attitude dealing with the relationship between the ballot comments and the contestant's self-concept has not been formed prior to receipt of these ballots, a severe injustice could be inflicted on the student. It would seem imperative that part of a philosophical framework for using ballots include formation of a healthy attitude about how ballot comments should be weighed in relation to one's self-concept.

In the process of developing a framework through which the student and coach can respond to ballot comments, it seems important that a proper attitude toward the process and product should be developed before it is necessary to respond. The student and coach should clarify their attitudes dealing with the relationship between the ballot commentaries and one's personal growth; one's status as a winner; and one's sense of self-concept. If one is adequately prepared

to look at the ballot commentaries, extensive use can be made of the criticisms.

The next item of concern in the process of developing a strategy for dealing with comments on the student's ballots involves deciding how to handle the process of interacting with the ballots. The most immediate concern in developing a strategy for interacting with the ballots is deciding where and when to distribute them to the contestants. Klopf suggests that "Perhaps criticism is most helpful if it is given as soon after the practice or performance as possible" (1982, p. 264). He goes on to note that "Post-tournament evaluations require skillful handling....Listen with understanding to their complaints...." (pp. 264-265). While it is probably human nature to want immediate feedback, is that the best idea? In many instances, ballots are disseminated immediately after the tournament awards session - either on the host campus or in the van(s). The contestant is afforded an opportunity to have immediate feedback. As noted earlier in the Fisher and Smith citation, people are not always able to see themselves objectively. Consequently, the immediate reaction may be one without coach interaction and may reflect a situation where the contestant is either over-critical of self or of the critic. Some schools do not disseminate ballots until the coach has had an opportunity to screen them. Other schools do not disseminate ballots until the squad is back on campus on Monday, after the tournament weekend. The delay in the dissemination of ballots affords the coach greater latitude and opportunity to interact with the contestant in the process of dealing

with the critical comments. Coaches should give serious thought to the when and where of ballot distribution.

Another facet involved in posturing the contestant's interaction with the ballots involves the actual moment of reading. Out of concern and caring, it is probably true that more than one contestant ballot has been misplaced by the student's coach. Since ballot comments tend to carry a very personal message to the reader, this writer would encourage the coach to be proxemic to the contestant. Frequently, it is helpful to have both contestant and coach respond together to the ballots. This approach affords the coach an opportunity to add the positive commentary that the judge did not write, or did not take the time to write. Coaches often underestimate the importance of supplementing the dialogue on the written ballot.

Briefly, if the coach is going to make the process of doing something with the ballots worthwhile, some attention needs to be given to setting the scene for reading the ballots. Students who are left alone to read their ballots may feel disillusioned, discouraged, and in some instances defeated. Coaches and contestants should not forget that it is hard to look at one's self objectively. In many instances, contestants become over-critical of themselves if there is no person there to help establish a more accurate sense of reality.

The final issue to be addressed in this paper is the issue of passing judgment on the judge's ballot. How should a coach and contestant respond? One strategy that the contestant and coach might

employ is to separate the criticisms into categories. The most obvious commentary categories are those of content and delivery. Greater use of the ballot might be made, however, if the categories of comments were to be expanded. One might further categorize judge comments as: rule violation comments; descriptors of the speaker's/reader's verbal and nonverbal behavior; reactionary comments (positive or negative) to the materials of the presentation; suggestions on how to improve; and comments which suggest that the judge was not listening carefully. One might find a need, after trying such a system, to add additional categories. Basically, however, such a classification system might depersonalize an otherwise highly personalized ballot. To minimize some of the emotional reaction to the critique one might also create a standard response system to be used in evaluating ballot comments. The evaluative response system might be as simple as having words like agree, disagree, or maybe as standard responses to the comments. Somewhat akin to cognitive therapy, a new and perhaps more accurate reality might be created simply by objectifying the comments on the ballot. One might also have a category on a ballot evaluation form where a person could categorize the judge as dysfunctional. While the majority of critics try hard, some critics may lack the training and background to fulfill the "educator" role in the round. One should not presume, however, that the person in the back of the room is not capable of functioning as an educator-critic simply because the person is not a "regular" on the circuit.

The options, with respect to a philosophy of using ballots, are that one has a plan or one does not have a plan for dealing with ballots. If coaches choose to develop a plan, consideration ought to be given to developing a healthy attitude toward comments as a source of growth, as a tool of acknowledging one's successes, and as a means of gaining knowledge about one's self concept. Additionally, it is important that the coach have some plan for directly interacting with the students at the time and place of ballot reading. Finally, some tool should be developed to help sort out judge comments. Coaches need to be there for their students. As Carl Rogers has written: "...When a teacher is real, understanding, and caring, students learn more of the 'basics,' and in addition exhibit more creativity and problem-solving qualities" (1982, p. 3). Coaches, and judges too, need to be real, understanding, and caring!

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